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When Atheists Become Deities: How *Vox Lux* Shows the Intersection of Secularism,
Religion, and Pop Stardom in Consumer Society

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REL-211: Religion and Film

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The 2017 Instagram photo of Beyoncé holding her newly born twins may not immediately register as religious, but does contain strong visual parallels to Christian symbols. She evokes the image of a veiled Virgin Mary looking down upon us, her disciples, as a saint. There is no question that the influence of Western religion can be overtly observed in both the images and content of many musical performers like Beyoncé. Religious content of this kind may lead to the assumption that musicians who are not traditionally religious (Björk, John Lennon, and Marilyn Manson, to name a few) could not be connected to religious concepts in any way, which is precisely the assumption I would like to challenge. Using the scholarly work of Talal Asad, Kent Brintnall, René Girard, John Lyden, Rupert Till and Emilie Townes, this paper will argue that the religious concepts of idolization and suffering are applicable to secular representations of popular music figures through selected scene and character analyses of the film *Vox Lux* (2018). I will then assert these religious comparisons play a substantial role in the economic profitability of the modern music industry under capitalism, drawing parallels on the negative consumer effects of celebrity worship from the film *An Honest Liar* (2014).

Although non-specialists tend to think of secularism and religion as opposed to one another in definition, some religious scholars perceive them to be interconnected. The work of cultural anthropologist Talal Asad, for example, offers an interconnected interpretation of these concepts, as he maintains, “The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred).”¹ By identifying secularism as neither an evolution from religion nor an entirely separate concept, Asad maintains that religion is in fact reinforced by the existence of secularism and effectively provides the

¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 25.

framework to analyze the merging of religious thought and secular representation in the film *Vox Lux*. Specifically, I will identify the ways in which the fictional main character, Celeste, publicly presents herself as a secular figure and how this is a paradoxical representation that serves to reinforce principles found in Western religion.

The influence of Western religion in this film comes from Celeste's divine presence in the eyes of her fans. Celeste is introduced in this film as both as a shy, traumatized teenager and later as a 31-year-old pop star with self-destructive behaviors, which may seem disconnected from religious concepts at first glance. First, it should be noted that Celeste's previously held faith and her present atheistic demeanor are not cleanly broken into different sections of her life, as shown in the "Regenesis" section of the film (ex: her moment of silence on the beach can be interpreted as a prayer, contrast to her press conference remarks earlier that day that deny the existence of God). Despite this inner conflict between religion and secularism within Celeste (which also happens to work under Asad's claim), it is more important to note that Celeste maintains her atheism outwardly towards the public, such as her press statement directed at the Croatian beach terrorists where she claimed she "used to believe in God too" and if they wanted something "new to believe in, they can believe in me." I include this scene because she undoubtedly establishes her atheism and also directly offers herself as an idol for people to worship rather than a traditional God. Perhaps a more intimate scene between Celeste and her fans comes from Celeste's performance at the end of the film. In calling her fans her "little angels" while quite literally standing on a pedestal, she not only values her fans more than ordinary people in this space, but she also provides herself as the only higher power for these "angels" to worship, just as angels would only have God to worship in Heaven (a real-world example of this is Lady Gaga

and her “Little Monsters”). This celebrity worship is only amplified by public sympathy from Celeste’s widely known tragic past, contributing to her ascension as a secular deity.

The violent myth seen in this film is represented by Celeste’s tremendous suffering, heightening the idea that she is some type of deity. For clarity, the definition of myth drawn for this argument comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz and is supported by religious scholar John Lyden. Geertz introduces a nonreductive definition that sees myth as a connection between the everyday world (the real) and views on how the world ought to be (the ideal).² In the film, Celeste survives a fatal school shooting that inadvertently leads to her fame, thus offering a real representation of life’s atrocities while also presenting an ideal world of stardom (I call her stardom ideal because her fans would believe it to be ideal, as they do not see the full extent of emotional and interpersonal struggles that we, the film viewers, see in her private life). According to religious scholar Kent Brintnall’s analysis of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), religious narratives that represent suffering are seen as honorable and admirable, and this concept may be applied to other narratives that depict the concept of suffering.³ By stating that suffering can occur in both religious and nonreligious contexts while producing the same effect, the notion that Jesus suffers for his followers can be extended from *The Passion of the Christ* directly to *Vox Lux* and effectively introduces the notion that Celeste shares characteristics with divine figures, as discussed further in the next paragraph when I compare her to Jesus Christ.

Another relevant detail in Celeste’s deification comes from her role as an innocent victim in the New Brighton terrorist attack, where similarities between her life and the life of Jesus Christ can be observed. The particulars of innocence, victimization, and deification in Jesus’s life are examined in René Girard’s analysis of the Gospels:

² John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 44.

³ Kent Brintnall, *Ecce Homo: the Male-Body-in-Pain as Redemptive Figure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 56.

The deification process is based on the capacity of victims to polarize violence, bringing the community together as it transfers its mimetic contagion to the victim. The victim enables the “abscess of fixation” to function, which reabsorbs and pacifies all the conflicts. If the transference that demonizes the victim is powerful enough, then the reconciliation is so sudden and complete that it appears to be miraculous and triggers a second transference superimposed on the first one, the transference of deification.⁴

Interpreting this quotation in relation to *Vox Lux*, some fans may see Celeste as a figure who suffers for them with her troubled past just as Jesus Christ suffered for his disciples through his own experiences with betrayal and physical torture. I admit this example is not perfect because Celeste’s fans (the “community”) are not themselves the inflictors of the terrorist acts on Celeste. However, Celeste may still be a figure in which fans desire to imitate (“transfer their mimetic contagion”) and effectively “demonize” her with these desires, ultimately establishing her as a deity. This representation of Celeste as godlike is on par with Lyden’s claim that secularism is not truly different from traditional religion, but only creates more religious alternatives.⁵ Following this argument, her fans may find themselves more spiritually moved through attending her concerts rather than participating in a church service or other more traditional religious events. With Celeste being such an impactful (and as I’ve argued - religious) “secular” figure, an idea which applies to real-world musicians, I will now pivot the focus of this essay to analyze how this guise of secularism can be financially advantageous for the industry that backs these artists.

On that note, I think it can be said that this idolization and deification of famous musicians contributes to their financial success and the success of the modern music industry.

⁴ Girard René, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 122.

⁵ Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, 90.

This claim is backed by an essay from music study researcher Rupert Till, where he contends that “Consumer culture uses popular icons as examples of idealized consumers, the music industry in particular presenting them as perfect models of consumption.”⁶ This quotation connects the concepts of pop star idolization and suffering as seen in *Vox Lux* to its significance in bolstering capitalism in Western society, for without the religious dedication and worship from their fans (aka disciples), popular musicians would not be held up as a “perfect model” in consumer culture (whether it be for products that benefit the music industry, pushing their own merchandise, etc.). The work of Christian ethicist and theologian Emilie Townes is also relevant here, as she discusses at length that, “Those who appropriate have no desire to know, only to use the new culture to fit into a profit margin that is more often commercial and sociocultural.”⁷ Though Townes’ argument taken in context of her book relates to the commodification of Black identity and should not be separated from this original text, I would like to extend her ideas on commodification to include the use of religious concepts by the music industry with the primary intention of maximizing profit. While I am not suggesting pop musicians are the primary influence feeding the economy nor consumer culture, recognizing the financial motivations of the large and influential industry behind these musicians can be beneficial, especially when people are often emotionally and/or spiritually invested in them.

The biographical film documentary, *An Honest Liar*, more closely examines this connection between religious figures and the mass financial exploitation of their spiritually invested followers. The charlatan Peter Popoff is targeted by magician James Randi in this documentary for feigning a connection with God and gaining significant personal wealth off

⁶ Rupert Till, “Pop Stars and Idolatry: an Investigation of the Worship of Popular Music Icons, and the Music and Cult of Prince,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 31, no. 1 (2010): pp. 69-80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617671003666761>, 3.

⁷ Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 42.

vulnerable people in desperate life situations. Randi found that because many of Popoff's followers idolized him, they were often willing to donate exorbitant amounts of money to his organization because they believed he spoke for God. Having established in this essay that popular musicians can represent religious figures, I pose this question—what makes pop concerts so different? This comparison may seem unfair because Peter Popoff is an extreme (and immoral) example of what it means to be a religious figure, but I ask that you consider the parallels nonetheless. With large prices of admission for concerts and celebrities we worship as if they were Gods, is it too extreme to suggest that some of us are unquestionably following musical artists and inadvertently contributing to the financial exploitation of these religious principles? With a society that depends so much on celebrity worship, perhaps it is time for each of us to reevaluate our relationship with the modern music industry and whether these consumer habits truly yield the rewards we seek.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that this essay is not aimed at revealing the evils of capitalism, suggest we are all brainwashed under some cult-type influence of pop artists, or in any way imply Western religion is flawed for analogous reasons. By demonstrating the religious parallels of divinity and suffering in pop stars (think, many musicians often inspire more sympathy from supporters if they have experienced tragic life events), I offer an extension of Christian concepts to include secular musical figures and the exploitation of these concepts within the context of a billion-dollar industry. Whether you look strictly at the music industry or to other instances where exploitation may take place, it is up to each individual to question the faith they put into celebrities and the institutions they represent. It is up to each individual to decide whether that faith is appreciated, mutually beneficial, and ultimately justified.

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